

## LINGUISTIC STRUCTURES AND THE STRUCTURES OF SOCIAL GROUPS

Antoine Meillet demonstrated in 1906 that language corresponds exactly to the definition of a social fact. "Language is... eminently a social fact." In effect, this is explicitly implied in the definition proposed by Durkheim. A language exists independently of the individuals who speak it, and although it has no reality outside the sum of these individuals, it is nevertheless, due to its general character, exterior to each of them, thus proving that it does not depend on any single person to modify it and that every individual deviation from common usage provokes a reaction."<sup>1</sup> Meillet shows moreover that the causes for semantic changes are social in character and can be classified into three main types. They are explained by changes in the thing meant, by the transfer of words from one social group to another, and, thirdly, by intrinsic linguistic conditions. In fact the causes are outside the linguistic system itself—the causes for changes of the third type are not

Translated by Victor A. Velen.

<sup>1</sup> *L'Année sociologique, 1904-1905*, p. 1.

the linguistic conditions themselves but lie in whatever has induced these conditions—and this is true of every linguistic system (by system of a language I mean also the relationships between the words and their sense). The division of a society into classes or castes produces differences in vocabulary, grammar, phonetics and phonemics, in style, etc. The adoption of a new language by a people can lead to profound changes through the agency of the substratum. The material and spiritual evolution of a society is followed by the appearance of a great number of new words and new meanings which have repercussions on other parts of the linguistic system, a characteristic aspect of the linguistic development of Europe and of the languages of every society of our time which has become industrialized and has adopted modern Western civilization.

Language itself is hence a social phenomenon and the changes to which it is subject in time also have a social character. But that does not necessarily imply dependence or a parallelism between a linguistic structure and the society that uses this structure as a means of communication. If a language were to be changed too rapidly, it would be ill suited to its purpose, which is to provide a means of communication that can be easily understood by all members of society. In order to prove the existence of a direct dependence between the linguistic structure and the structure of society one would have to prove that the differences existing between the grammatical structures of two languages are evident, so to speak, in the structure of the society. However, the morphological structure of a language can remain more or less the same despite revolutionary changes in the structure of the society that speaks it. In a modern state, in which technical civilization evolves rapidly, this evolution is translated by a rapid increase in the vocabulary, whereas the structure itself of the language remains stable, mostly due to the schooling. In the Indo-European languages there is opposition between the morphological categories of the verb and the noun, an opposition that goes back to the neolithic age. The same, or nearly the same, thing is true for the category of adjectives. When it is a question of the morphological structure and the social structure, all that one can assume is that the creation of a new category answers a social need. It is significant that in societies of hunters and

fishermen, in which people possess nothing that needs to be counted, languages generally have no category of numbers—it is said that those who speak these languages only “know how” to count to three or four, whereas all the common categories may be found even among “primitive” peoples who are obliged to count their products. But different social groups do not necessarily use the same procedures to express more-or-less identical needs.

What languages express by their fundamental categories and by their vocabularies differs widely when we are dealing with civilizations as different, for example, as the Chinese, the Egyptian and the modern West. Certain languages express nearly the same relationships and the same things, but in a different fashion. This is the case for instance with the languages of Western Europe compared among themselves, or as compared to the languages of Eastern Europe. The Western languages are more “simple,” that is, they do not use many methods of flexion, which characterized these same languages in their earliest periods—compare modern French to Latin, English to Anglo-Saxon, etc. East-European languages, such as the Slavic languages, still use this method to a considerable extent. The evolution of Western languages has been attributed to the influence of abstract thought, which has developed in the West with the growth of the sciences, technique and philosophy. Yet, it does not appear that the ideas of the modern world need necessarily be expressed by languages of the western type; they are also expressed by languages, such as Russian, for example. The question may therefore be raised as to whether the difference may not be explained rather by the different history of the countries in question, by the role of Latin in the West, adopted by the immigrants in the Roman Empire and simplified. This phenomenon usually occurs with languages when they are transmitted to adult populations and by the influence of this simplified Latin or Roman beyond the borders of the ancient empire. For one may discern the development of a general parallelism between the different languages, even those that are not related to each other, within one area of civilization.

With respect to the particular problems of relationships among various languages or various linguistic types and the characteristics of the societies that use them, we must take into

account a great number of factors of a general as well as of a specific nature. Historical facts frequently get lost in prehistory. In attempting to evaluate the various factors, we would have to take into consideration in addition the characteristics of the material and spiritual civilization of the society in question, as well as other factors, such as for example the number of speaking members of the linguistic group which forms this society, as well as its size. It seems that a certain correlation exists between the characteristics of the linguistic structure and these facts. Structures of extreme morphological complexity, with a great number of phonemes, are found mainly in languages spoken by small groups, such as certain Caucasian and Indian languages. The large groups, however, do not necessarily possess languages of great morphological or phonemic simplicity.

A certain language is a social fact tied to a certain human group. But there are also in a given linguistic structure facts which are not social, but human, according to Durkheim's definition. Linguists speak of universal traits. For example, there are syllables throughout phonemic structures. Everywhere we find elements of the same character which compose phonemes, or if one prefers, syllables, as there are languages whose sequence may be analyzed only in syllables. There are evidently also universal traits in the morphology—the presence of an element that signifies the person who is speaking and of another that indicates the one being spoken to, is universal—and in linguistic changes. But it is dangerous to assume too much, since our knowledge of the languages of the world is imperfect.

Certain features of a basic character however are common to linguistic structures and social structures, features which may be observed mainly in relatively simple, technically little-developed societies.

In the phonemic structure the dualist opposition plays a fundamental role. A phonemic structure consists of a system of dualist oppositions. The phoneme is composed of a group of distinctive characteristics of sonority or tonality which are opposed to each other in different ways to express different meanings or functions of the complexes of which they form a part. There are oppositions between vocal and non-vocal phonemes, between compact and diffused, between sonorous and mute, between acute

and grave phonemes, etc. (cf. R. Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language*). If we take the structure of Irish for example, as it was in archaic northwestern parlance, we find dualist oppositions such as the following, which are the most systematic: vowels—consonants; sonorics consonants—mute consonants; taut consonants—lax consonants (pronounced as spirants when they are opposed to occlusives); and acute consonants—grave consonants. It is remarkable that the opposition taut—lax and acute—grave are found with all consonants (occlusive, nasal, and liquid).

So far as the homogeneous verbal forms are concerned, that is, those which are not composed of elements that can be isolated, the present is in opposition to the imperfect, both expressing the habitual (*ólaim bainne* "I drink milk (every day)"—*d'ólainn bainne* "I used to drink milk"; the future is opposed to the perfect: *pillfidh mé* "I will return" (phonetically *p'il'b'i*)—*phill mé* "I returned." The imperfect is also opposed to the conditional: *d'ólainn* "I was drinking"—*d'ólfaínn* "I would have drunk." The verbal system of modern Norwegian (*Ryksmål*) also has dualist opposition: the present *jeg skriver* "I write"—the past *jeg skrev* "I wrote," whereas the future and the perfect are periphrastic: *jeg vil skrive* "I will write"—*jeg har skrevet* "I have written." (See also the Irish oppositions such as *tá mé aig ól* "I am in the process of drinking"—*bhí mé aig ól* "I was in the process of drinking.")

The structure of a language is thus characterized by interlacing oppositions which for the most part are binary. Similar dualist oppositions are found in the structures of human societies. A good number of societies have exogamic dimidiations, which divide again into sports or ceremonial sections, secret societies, men's associations and age groups, as well as oppositions of residence, for example (see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Anthropologie structurale*, pp. 117 ff.). But social organization not only contains binary opposition, but also others, mainly ternary—Lévi-Strauss even wonders whether the dualist structure really exists (*op. cit.*, pp. 133 ff.). Whatever the case may be, ternary oppositions also exist in linguistic structures, but it appears that they are less frequent. There are languages in Europe which not only oppose

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but also

<i>i</i>	<i>ü</i>	<i>u</i>
<i>e</i>	<i>ö</i>	<i>o</i>

We find similar ternary oppositions in grammatical structure, for instance in the French pronouns *moi—toi; il—elle* (with a binary opposition within the last category). Gaelic spoken in the central part of Wales opposes the three tenses of the verb: present—future—past, etc.

Phonemic structures in languages are characterized by features which oppose a whole category, or even all the consonants or all the vowels, such as the palatal character found mainly in the Eastern European, Asian and Irish languages. The palatal character is, so to speak, the definite mark of opposition. Yet, it is not necessarily the palatal quality that always distinguishes one of the two series. Thus in northern Irish the labial consonants are not accompanied by a movement of the tongue toward the position of *j* (the sound in French of *pige* "piller," for example) but are articulated with the lips pressed against the teeth. Whereas in the other series the non-palatal, which so far as the consonants are concerned is accompanied by a slight movement of the back of the tongue, is strongly velarized in the case of the labials; articulation is followed by a glide *w*, for example, *b<sup>w</sup>ān* "blanc." The opposition of the two series may also be used for grammatical purposes. Thus a palatal final consonant of a noun often signifies the genitive, for example, *b'ēl* "mouth," genitive *b'ēl'* (' designates the palatal character). Frequently the palatal character is combined with another distinctive sign, for example, *brōg* "shoe," genitive *brōg'o*. But when the word ends in a palatal consonant, the genitive has a non-palatal consonant, as in western (Irish *abir* "father," genitive *abər* (in the North *abərə*), and in the North, *mōn* "peat," genitive *mōnə*, etc.

A similar feature is found in social organizations. Lévi-Strauss shows that a global system exists in various societies: *brother/sister, husband/wife, father/son, maternal uncle/son of sister*. The following law may be formulated: in both groups the relation between the maternal uncle and the nephew is to the relation between brother and sister as the relation between father

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and son is to the relation between husband and wife. Sometimes the first series, sometimes the second, is lodged so to speak in the positive. In Tonga, Polynesia, where filiation is patrilinear, relations between husband and wife are harmonious, although the husband has a superior status to his wife, and the relations between the nephew and the maternal uncle are very free. The relations between father and son are opposed to the free relations between nephew and maternal uncle. The father is *tapu* to his son. The *tapu* between brother and sister is even stronger. They cannot even remain together under the same roof. Among the natives of the Kutubu Lake, in New Guinea, who are also patrilinear, and patrilocal, the structure is the reverse. The relations between father and son are intimate, whereas the wife has a very low status with regard to her husband. The wife looks to her brother for protection against her husband. The relations between nephew and maternal uncle are "respectful," a term that best describes them, combined with an element of fear—the maternal uncle can damn the nephew and afflict him with a serious illness (cf. Lévi-Strauss, *op. cit.*, Chap. II).

In order to establish a basis of comparison between language and society it would be necessary to follow the initiative of Lévi-Strauss and to determine how linguistic structures and general social structures behave from a synchronistic point of view.